



Violet Bonham Carter

Helen Violet Bonham Carter, Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury, DBE (15 April 1887 – 19 February 1969), known until her marriage as Violet Asquith, was a British politician and diarist. She was the daughter of Herbert Asquith, Prime Minister from 1908–1916, and later became active in Liberal politics herself, being a leading opponent of appeasement, standing for Parliament and being made a life peer. She was also involved in arts and literature. Her illuminating diaries cover her father's premiership before and during World War I and continue until the 1960s.

She was Sir Winston Churchill's closest female friend, apart from his wife, and her grandchildren include the actress Helena Bonham Carter.

Early life

Violet Asquith grew up in a heavily political environment, living in 10 Downing Street, at the time her father occupied it, and socialising with the key political figures of her day. She did not go to school, but was educated at home by governesses, and later sent to Paris and Dresden to improve her languages. Her mother, Helen Kelsall Melland, died of typhoid fever when Violet was only four. Her stepmother was Margot Tennant. Her best friend when she was young was Venetia Stanley, who had an affair with her father. Violet quarreled constantly with her formidable stepmother Margot, much to her father's distress; in later life she admitted that despite their differences, she respected Margot for her absolute devotion to Asquith.

Violet Bonham Carter's father served a long and influential term as Prime Minister, especially during the peacetime portion of his premiership (1908–1914) when he presided over the People's Budget and the House of Lords limiting Parliament Act 1911. He was Prime Minister at the beginning of World War I and then headed a coalition with the Conservative Party beginning in May 1915 until his resignation in December 1916. The Liberal Party split thereafter between followers of Asquith and of David Lloyd George, who had replaced him as Prime Minister. As the Liberal Party fell on hard times in the 1920s, she became a tireless defender of her father and his reputation, beginning by campaigning for him at the 1920 Paisley by-election.

She was particularly close to Winston Churchill, a leading member of her father's (and later Lloyd George's) administration, and whom she (successfully) urged her father to promote to the Cabinet in 1908. She was dismayed at his engagement that year to Clementine Hozier, whom Violet thought "as stupid as an owl". In late August, between his engagement and his marriage, Churchill spent a holiday with the Asquith family at New Slains Castle on the Scottish coast, and later admitted that he had "behaved badly" to Violet, as they were "almost engaged". Some days after his departure, Violet went missing one evening, and she was discovered after a dangerous search by local people, lasting several hours. Journalists were told that she had slipped and fallen onto a ledge, hitting her head, but in fact she had been found lying uninjured near the coastal path. Michael Sheldon suggests that Churchill's holiday with Violet may have been the reason for Clementine's last-minute threat to call off their wedding, and that Violet's subsequent adventure on the cliffs may have been "an unhappy young woman's cry for attention".

Marriage and children



As well as having an illustrious father, she married her father's Principal Private Secretary, Sir Maurice "Bongie" Bonham Carter, in 1915. They had four children together:

- Hon. Helen Laura Cressida, Mrs Jasper Ridley, mother of the economist Adam Ridley
- Rt. Hon. Mark Bonham Carter, Baron Bonham Carter of Yarnbury, a Liberal Member of Parliament before going to the House of Lords and father of Jane, Baroness Bonham Carter
- Hon. Raymond Bonham Carter, father of the actress Helena Bonham Carter.
- Hon. Laura Bonham Carter, Lady Grimond, wife of the Liberal Party leader Joseph Grimond, Baron Grimond of Firth

Political career

Lady Violet lived in an age when women were uncommon in frontline British politics. She was nonetheless active as President of the Women's Liberal Federation (1923–25, 1939–45) and was the first woman to serve as President of the Liberal Party (1945–47).[2] In the 1945 general election she stood for Wells, coming third, while in 1951 she stood for the winnable seat of Colne Valley. In the 1953 Coronation Honours she was appointed a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE).[3]

As an old friend, Churchill arranged for the Conservatives to refrain from nominating a candidate for the constituency, giving her a clear run against Labour. She was nonetheless narrowly defeated. She continued to be a popular and charismatic speaker for Liberal candidates, including for her son-in-law Jo Grimond, her son Mark, and the then-rising star Jeremy Thorpe, and she was a frequent broadcaster on current affairs programmes on radio and television.

Perhaps her greatest contribution, however, was as a much-esteemed orator and perceptive thinker on politics and policy issues, dedicated to classic Liberal politics in the mould of her father. She spoke on many platforms throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and along with Winston Churchill (and others), she very early on saw the dangers of European fascism. In seeking to awaken Britain and the world to the fascist peril, she joined and animated a number of anti-fascist groups (such as The Focus Group), often in concert with Churchill, and spoke at many of their gatherings. In a 1938 speech she mocked Neville Chamberlain's dealings with Nazi Germany as the policy of 'peace at any price that others can be forced to pay'. [2] In the postwar years she was an active supporter of the United Nations and the cause of European Unity, advocating for Britain's entry into the Common Market.

In the non-political sphere, she was also active in the arts, including serving as a Governor of the BBC from 1941–46, and a Governor of the Old Vic (1945–69). Her active political life was combined with air raid warden duties during the Second World War.

Additionally, she was an avid keeper of diaries, which now form an important original source for historians of early 20th century Britain and contain many perceptive character sketches, as well as insights into contemporary events. Indeed, it was Lady Violet who in her book *Winston Churchill As I Knew Him* (1965), published in the U.S. as *Winston Churchill: An Intimate Portrait*, supplied one of the most famous – and telling – anecdotes about Winston Churchill, one apparently not recorded in her diaries or contemporaneous letters: this recounted how during the course of a deep conversation at

the dinner party at which they first met, Churchill concluded a thought with words to the effect that "Of course, we are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow worm."

On 21 December 1964, she was created a life peer as Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury in the County of Wiltshire,^[5] one of the first new Liberal peers in several decades. She continued to be extremely active in the House of Lords.

Her previous title, Lady Violet, was a courtesy title from her father's elevation to the peerage as Earl of Oxford and Asquith in 1925, and her husband was a knight of the realm. She and her husband were one of the few couples who both held titles in their own right.

Death

She died of a heart attack, aged 81, and was interred at St Andrew's Church, Mells, Somerset.

Titles from birth

- 15 April 1887 – 30 November 1915: Miss Violet Asquith
- 30 November 1915 – 1916:^[7] Mrs Maurice Bonham Carter
- 1916 – 9 February 1925: Lady Bonham Carter
- 9 February 1925 – 1953:^[8] Lady Violet Bonham Carter
- 1953 – 21 December 1964: Lady Violet Bonham Carter, DBE
- 21 December 1964 – 19 February 1969: The Right Honourable. The Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury, DBE

Writings

- "Winston Churchill As I Know Him" by Violet Bonham Carter, in Winston Spencer Churchill *Servant of Crown and Commonwealth*, ed Sir James Marchant, London: Cassell, 1954.
- *Winston Churchill as I Knew Him*, Violet Bonham Carter (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1965), published in the USA as *Winston Churchill - An Intimate Portrait*
- *Lantern Slides - The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter, 1904–1914*, eds. Mark Bonham Carter and Mark Pottle (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996)

- *Champion Redoubtable - The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter, 1914–1945*, ed. Mark Pottle (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998)
- *Daring to Hope - The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter, 1945–1969*, ed. Mark Pottle (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000)

References

- Shelden 2013, p180-91
- Pottle, Mark (May 2007). "Carter, (Helen) Violet Bonham, Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury (1887–1969)". *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn. Oxford University Press. Retrieved 15 April 2014.
- *The London Gazette: (Supplement) no. 39863. p. 2953. 1 June 1953.*
- Violet Bonham Carter, *Winston Churchill as I Knew Him* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1965; published in the USA as *Winston Churchill: An Intimate Portrait*), p. 16
- *The London Gazette: no. 43522. p. 10933. 22 December 1964.*
- "Died". *Time magazine*. 28 February 1969. Retrieved 2011-01-03. Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury, 81, grande dame of British politics and symbol of the Liberal Party's intellectual-humanist tradition; in London. The daughter of Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1908–16), Lady Asquith became her party's most eloquent spokesman in the 1930s. She was twice defeated for the House of Commons, but in 1964 was granted a lifetime peerage and thus a seat in the House of Lords — from which she berated Prime Minister Wilson for his failure to cope with Britain's economic woes.
- "Sir Maurice Bonham Carter". *The Peerage*. 6 July 2010.
- "Lady Helen Violet Asquith, Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury". *The Peerage*. 6 July 2010.; the date of her appointment to the DBE is before 10 November based on "British Democracy Today and Yesterday" (see Sources).

Further reading

- Shelden, Michael (2013). *Young Titan*. Simon & Schuster. ISBN 1-471-11322-1. (A biography of the young Winston Churchill)
- Lady Violet Bonham Carter, DBE, "British Democracy Today and Yesterday, the Challenge to the Individual". *The Falconer Lectures*, University of Toronto, 10/11 November 1953.
- Violet Asquith at Spartacus Educational, includes quotations. Accessed June 2008

- Catalogue of the correspondence and papers of Lady Violet Bonham Carter, 1892–1969, University of Oxford, Elizabeth Turner 2003
- Lady Violet Bonham-Carter has also been cited many times in Lynne Olson's 2007 history, *Troublesome Young Men: The Rebels Who Brought Churchill to Power and Helped Save England* (Farrar Straus Giroux, Publ.)

External links

- "Archival material relating to Violet Bonham Carter". UK National Archives.
- Violet Bonham Carter discussing the women's suffrage movement